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ABSTRACT

The work of Lev Vygotsky, a Russian developmental psychologist, has made enormous recent contributions to the fields of child development and education. This paper recounts a conversation with Gita Levovna Vygodskaya, Vygotsky's eldest daughter, also a psychologist. There were two foci of the conversation. The first was on the parallels between Vygotsky and Jean Piaget, especially the use of their children as subjects of study. The second focus was on the zone of proximal development, the relationship between studying and development, and its use for diagnosis and teaching. (Contains 19 references.) (KB)

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A Conversation with Gita Levovna Vygodskaya

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Gita Levovna Vygodskaya, the second generation of four generations of Russian psychologists, is the older daughter of Lev Semonovich Vygotsky. She is a warm, gracious woman who was seventy years of age when we met with her in Moscow in summer, 1994. There is a physical resemblance between Gita Levovna and her father, Lev---the same facial features, the same dark hair, and the haunting blue eyes. When asked about this resemblance, she laughed and said:

One of his workers called me "Lev Semonovich in a skirt".

Although Gita was only ten years old when her famous father died, she remembers him vividly. Historians of this great developmental psychologist seek her out as a resource. Gita is a modest person who does not consider herself an expert on the theories of her father. However, in recent years, she has been the featured speaker at psychological conferences where she presents a portrait of her father the man, rather than Lev Vygotsky the genius.

We met Gita in Moscow at the grand residence of Morozov. Gita eagerly shared the story of her father's life---from his early years in Gomel to his death in Moscow. She came prepared with a packet of his

personal papers and dozens of family photographs. Although she focused on her father's life story, she also drew some parallels between her father and Piaget and shared a brief explanation of the zone of proximal development. These two latter topics are of interest to educators.

Parallels to Piaget

Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget were born in the same year and pursued similar interests regarding child development. Although they were contemporaries, they never met. However, Gita shared the following regarding her experiences with Piaget.

I met Jean Piaget and gave a picture of Vygotsky to him when he was in Moscow. Although Vygotsky knew of Piaget's works and wrote a critique of Piaget's book that was published in Russia at that time, Piaget had not known of this text. In 1962, when the book Thought and Language was published in the United States , Piaget learned about Vygotsky's work through Jerome Bruner. In 1962, Piaget wrote a small book in which he stated that it was a pity that it took 25 years for him to learn the points

of view of Vygotsky. Piaget had correspondence with Luria and said that it was a great pity that Vygotsky died. Piaget wanted to be one of the authors of a book about Vygotsky, but such a book was never written.

Since Piaget used his children as his subjects, there had been speculation whether Vygotsky had observed his own children and learned from them as well. Gita presented a photograph of Vygotsky and a young girl seated before a maze in a laboratory situation. Gita said:

Here is Vygotsky performing an experiment with a child and the experimental child is me. I remember that my father conducted some experiments on me and my cousin that were similar to the experiments that Kohler did with primates. I don't know which turned out best. The experiment involved a labyrinth, and we had to take something---an orange---that was in the center of the labyrinth. The orange was a very good stimulus because we didn't usually have them.

In addition to being her father's experimental subject, Gita Levovna also related a personal story that demonstrated that Lev Vygotsky was an observer of his own children.

Can I tell you about one thing that happened? Once, in my childhood, we were walking after a very strong rain. I was very impressed by the river. It was up and it was very, very strong. When we came back home, I went up to my father and said: "Now I understand where rivers come from." "From where?", he asked. I said that people dig them up under bridges. He laughed. When I became older, in one of his works, I found the same thing. He wrote, "A great girl of mine said..." I said, "I know this girl very well!"

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

Although Gita Levovna hesitated to interpret her father's theories, she expressed respect for his work.

Some of his ideas, many of them, live now and they work now. For example, this idea of the relationship between studying and development- the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky had such examples: When a child knows something just now, his knowledge at that moment is at the level of actual development. And what this child can do with an adult is the zone of proximal development. Suppose that there are two children.

One of them has a very high level of actual development but a small zone of proximal development. And the second one has a low level of actual development but a very high, very wide zone of proximal development. How can you judge them when the two children come? With the traditional pedagogy/teaching, it was thought that the actual level was the main one so the first child is more intelligent. From the point of view of Vygotsky, the child who had the greater zone of proximal development should be valued more.

At first the idea of the zone of proximal development was only used for diagnosis, but I think that you can use it for other things. For example, when you are preparing a program for an individual child, you can use this zone of proximal development also. Vygotsky thought that when you are teaching in the zone of proximal development, there must be variety. For example, let's say that yesterday this was the zone of proximal development; today it's actual development and you have another zone of proximal development. Here he was talking about development, about the education that develops the child. He thought that education must be before the development so education must pull the development. This type of education will be very effective.

Concluding Remarks

At the end of the interview, Gita concluded our time together with the following statement:

A month ago I gave three reports at Tartuth University in Estonia, one of the most ancient universities in the world. After my report, one of the teachers told me: "Before this time, Vygotsky was a monument. Now he became a man." If I helped you to understand Vygotsky as a man, I am very happy. Thank you..

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Lev Semonovich Vygotsky was a seminal Russian developmental psychologist who lived from 1896-1934. Because of political and language barriers, Vygotsky's work did not come to the United States until 1962. Although Vygotsky's work had been recognized in other disciplines, the applicability of his theories to education is a rather recent phenomena. Vygotsky's contributions to child development and education include:

*cognitive development as a socially dynamic process---children learn through interaction with objects and people

*peers as tutors

*peers as models for less capable peers

*environment as the source of development

*environment effecting creativity

*language as a mediating tool for behaviors

*external speech as a form of verbal regulation

*communication as a bridge to learning

*memory being assisted with the use of signs

*wholistic approach to writing and reading

*zone of proximal development as a basis for authentic assessment

*teachers as guides in the zone of proximal development

*play extends the zone of proximal development

*play as the manifestation of imagination

*education preceding development

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